No Inner Core

An Introduction to the Doctrine of ANATTA

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Preface

The *anattā* doctrine is one of the most important teachings of Buddhism. It is the most distinctive feature of Buddhism for, as many scholars have recognized, it makes Buddhism different from all other religions. Although the *anattā* doctrine is so important, so distinctive, and supposedly so universally accepted by Buddhists, it is still the most misunderstood, the most misinterpreted, and the most distorted of all the teachings of the Buddha. Some scholars who have written on Buddhism had a great respect for the Buddha, liked His teachings, revered Him and honoured Him, but they could not imagine that such a profound thinker had actually denied the existence of a soul.

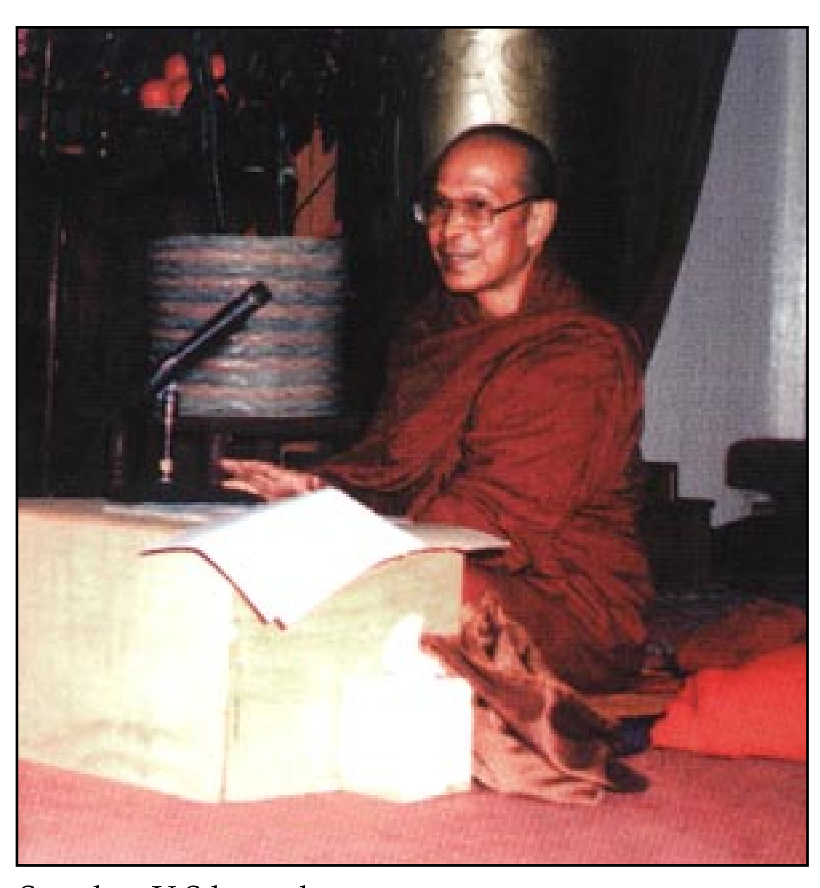
Sayadaw U Sīlānanda is the Abbot of the Dhammananda Vihara, Half Moon Bay, California, and the Spiritual Director of Dhammachakka Meditation Center, Theravada Buddhist Society of America and Tathagata Meditation Center, having been chosen by the renowned Burmese meditation master, the Most Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, to teach in America and spread the Dhamma in the West.

Sayadaw has been a Buddhist monk since 1947. He holds two *Dhammācariya* (Master of Dhamma) degrees and has taught at the Atithokdayone Pāḷi University and was an External Examiner at the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Art and Sciences, Mandalay, Myanmar. Sayadaw was the chief compiler of the comprehensive *Tipiṭaka Pāḷi-Burmese Dict-*

ionary and one of the final editors of the Pāḷi Texts, Commentaries, and Sub-Commentaries at the Sixth Buddhist Council, held in 1954.

Sayadaw is the author of seven scholarly Buddhist books in the Burmese language and an English publication on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, in 1990.

Since his arrival in America in 1979, Sayadaw has been teaching *Vipassanā* (Insight) meditation, *Abhidhamma* (Buddhist psychology), and other aspects of Theravāda Buddhism, and leading meditation retreats throughout the country and in Japan, Europe and Asia. Sayadaw is actively engaged in teaching a broad range of students in English, Burmese, Pāḷi and Sanskrit. Sayadaw is loved by his students as a skilled, patient and compassionate teacher.



Sayadaw U Sīlānanda

The understanding of *anattā*, the theory of no-soul or non-self, is a tough nut to crack. Yet only with a correct understanding of this key Buddhist issue can we open the door to the profound and liberating teachings of the Buddha.

Knowing about the crucial importance of the doctrine of *anattā*, the reader might gather his or her courage to work through Sayadaw's scholarly introduction to this central teaching.

Do not feel disheartened should the text be difficult for you at a first reading. If you want to practise insight meditation it is good enough to have a basic right feel about *anattā*. It is the suspension of disbelief in the idea of *anattā*, non-self, which is the key to the door of insight. Once you are inwardly open to the possibility of there being no soul or lasting ego-entity in you, then your investigation of reality through insight meditation will be free to unfold. It is actually only through such a meditative investigation and the resulting personal, intuitive experience of *anattā* that your preliminary openness and theoretical understanding can graduate into a verified and direct one.

You should return to Sayadaw's text after having had your own insight into the selfless nature of things, as you will find that understanding the text will then be much easier for you.

Bodhisara Stephen Gerber

Sharing of Merits…

May this booklet be of help
to many for deepening their
understanding of the Buddha Dhamma.
May this knowledge of the Buddha Dhamma
open the path to liberation and lead
to the attainment of Nibbana.
The sponsors of this booklet
share the merit of this dāna
with all beings.
May they too, by understanding
the Buddha Dhamma,
be able to put it into practice,
and may it finally lead them to
the attainment of Nibbana,
the path to the Happiness of Peace.

May all beings be well and happy.
Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!

Introduction

The following discourse is based on a collection of lectures on the *Anattā* doctrine given by Sayadaw U Sīlānanda. *Anattā* is a Pāḷi word consisting of a negative prefix, *'an'* meaning not, plus *atta*, soul, and is most literally translated as no-soul. The word *atta*, however, has a wide range of meanings, and some of those meanings cross over into the fields of psychology, philosophy, and everyday terminology, as, for example, when *atta* can mean *self, being, ego,* and *personality*. Therefore, in this preface, we will examine and elucidate the wide range of meanings which *atta* can signify in order to determine exactly what the Buddha denied when He proclaimed that He teaches *anattā*, that is, when He denied the existence of *atta*. We will examine both Buddhist and non-Buddhist definitions of the term *soul*, and we will also examine modern definitions of terms such as *ego* and *self*.

Most writers in the field of religion, when writing about *soul* or *anattā* specifically, use the terms *self, ego, being* and *soul* interchangeably, while psychologists define those terms as totally different entities. If we define *atta* as including the terms *self, ego, personality*, and *being*, we may make the mistake of claiming that Buddha denied the phenomena of individual differences, individual personalities, individual *kamma* and other features of individuality in people. But if we say that Buddha denied only the theological entity of a

soul, while leaving intact a psychological entity such as an ego or self, then we are also mistaken.

The resolution of this dilemma lies in the fact that we must deal with two levels of reality simultaneously, the ultimate level and the conventional level. In the absolute sense, the *anattā* doctrine denies any and all psychological entities or agents inside the person. In the absolute sense, all phenomena, including what is called a person, are composed of elements, forces, and a stream of successive states. The Buddha organized these phenomena into conceptual groups, known as *khandhas* (aggregates), and they are: (1) material processes, also known as bodily form, corporeality or matter; (2) feeling; (3) perception; (4) mental formations; and (5) consciousness. Most importantly, when all mental and physical phenomena are analyzed into those elements, no residual entity, such as a soul, self, or ego, can be found. In short, there are actions executed by these groups, but no actor. The workings of these groups of forces and elements appear to us as an ego or personality, but in reality, the ego or self or agent of the actions has only an illusory existence.

However, on the conventional level, the workings of these forces, elements, and states are organized by causal laws, and, although they in no way constitute any extra-phenomenal self or soul, they do produce a human individual, a person – if we want to call a certain combination of material and mental processes a person. This complex combination of material and mental processes is dependent entirely on previous processes, especially the continuity of *kamma* which is

the process of ethical volitions and the results of those volitions. Thus individual differences are accounted for even though the self or ego or personality is, in the ultimate sense, denied. An individual may be an angry, hot-tempered person, for example, because in the past he or she has performed actions which leave conditions for traits, which are *kamma* results, to arise in the present. But this happens because *kamma* leaves a potential for those traits of anger and ill will to arise, not because any kind of self of the person is continuing. Actually, the human individual does not remain the same for two consecutive moments; everything is a succession of forces and elements, and there is nothing substantial. Therefore, on the conventional level, we may say that individual differences have an illusory existence. Common everyday conceptions, such as ego, self, and personality, seem to be very real, obvious, and well-defined by psychologists and laymen alike, but they are, on the absolute level and in the eyes of those who have achieved enlightenment, illusory.

Another way to approach Buddhist psychology is to examine the very complex and technical psychological system known as *Abhidhamma*. The *Abhidhamma* is, in the words of Narada Maha Thera, "a psychology without a psyche."[1] *Abhidhamma* teaches that ultimate reality consists of four elementary constituents. One, *Nibbāna* (in Sanskrit, *Nirvāṇa*) is unconditioned, and the other three, *citta*, *cetasika*, and *rūpa* – consciousness, mental factors, and matter, respectively – are conditioned. These elementary constituents, called *dhammas*, alone possess ultimate reality. The familiar world

of objects and persons, and the interior world of ego and self, are only conceptual constructs created by the mind out of the elemental *dhammas*. *Abhidhamma* thus restricts itself to terms that are valid from the standpoint of ultimate realities: it describes reality in terms of ultimate truth. Thus it describes *dhammas*, their characteristics, their functions, and their relations. All conceptual entities, such as self or being or person, are resolved into their ultimates, into bare mental and material phenomena, which are impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, and empty of any abiding self or substance. Consciousness, for example, which seems like one continual flow, is described as a succession of discrete evanescent mental events, the *cittas*, and a complex set of mental factors, the *cetasikas*, which perform more specialized tasks in the act of consciousness. There is no self, soul, or any kind of agent inside a person involved in this process.[2]

Now let us examine some of the terms related to *atta* that we find in various sources. The definition of *Soul, Spirit* given in the *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions* is as follows: "That which gives life to any animate thing; or the inner, essential, or noncorporeal part or dimension of any animate thing; or a noncorporeal but animate substance or entity; or a noncorporeal but individuated personal being."[3]

Another definition of soul comes from Richard Kennedy in *The International Dictionary of Religion*: "Many religions teach that man is composed of a physical body, which does not survive death, and an eternal, invisible core which is the true self or soul."[4]

Donald Watson, in *A Dictionary of Mind and Spirit*, writes, in the entry *Soul*: "It goes by many names: *jīva* (Jain), *Ātman* (Hindu), Monad, Ego, Self, Higher Self, Overself, elusive self, psyche, or even Mind."[5]

In these non-Buddhist definitions of soul, we see many terms interchanged, such as *core, ego,* and *essence*. Sayadaw U Sīlānanda will elaborate on these meanings in his lectures.

Two Buddhist definitions of *atta* are here given. The first is from Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary*. "… anything that in the ultimate sense could be regarded as a self-existing, real ego-entity, soul or any other abiding substance."[6]

In *The Truth of Anatta*, Dr. G.P Malalasekera states that *atta* is "self, as a subtle metaphysical entity, soul."[7] These definitions also cover a wide range of meanings of the term *atta* and of the usual translations of *atta* as *soul* and *self.*

The above definitions of *atta, soul,* sometimes cross over into the realm of psychology when the authors define *soul* as *self, ego, psyche* or *mind*. Did the Buddha deny that such conceptions as ego and self are real when He proclaimed the *anattā* doctrine? Once again, the answer depends on whether we are speaking of absolute or conventional reality. But first we will examine some definitions from psychology to see what was actually denied both implicitly and explicitly by the *anattā* doctrine.

According to the *Dictionary of Psychology, self* is: "(1) the individual as a conscious being. (2) the ego or I. (3) the personality, or organization of traits."[8] The defi-

nition of *ego* is "the self, particularly the individual's conception of himself."[9] *Personality* is defined as "the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behavior and thought."[10] Another definition of personality is "that which permits a prediction of what a person will do in a given situation."[11] These psychological terms correspond to some of the terms used in Buddhism to deal with the conventional life of sentient beings. They have a useful purpose as labels, but in the ultimate sense, these labels are, as we shall see, mere designations which have only an illusory reality.

In Pāḷi, we have the terms *satta*, *puggala*, *jīva* and *atta* to describe the conventional psychology of beings. *Satta*, according to Nyanatiloka, means "living being."[12] *Puggala* means "individual, person, as well as the synonyms: personality, individuality, being (*satta*), self (*atta*)."[13] *Jīva* is "life, vital principle, individual soul."[14]

Some uses of *atta* also fall within the realm of psychology. *Atta* can mean, according to Dr. Malalasekera, "one's self or one's own, e.g. *attahitāya paṭipanno no parahitāya* (acting in one's own interest, not in the interest of others) or *attanā 'va akataṁ sādhu* (what is done by one's own self is good)." *Atta* can also mean "one's own person, the personality, including body and mind, e.g. in *attabhava* (life), *attapatilabha* (birth in some form of life)."[15]

Pāḷi has some terms which correspond to the psychological notions of traits. For example, the concept of nature or character is called *carita*.[16] Using this term, we can speak of different types of persons.

For example, we may describe a person as *rāga-carita* (greedy-natured), *dosa-carita* (hateful-natured), *moha-carita* (dull-natured), *saddhā-carita* (faithful-natured), *buddhi-carita* (intelligent-natured), and *vitakka-carita* (ruminating-natured) – six types altogether. Different people are at different stages of development, according to their *kamma*.

Buddhism does not deny that such conceptions of individuality have validity, but they have validity only in the conventional sense. Dr. Malalasekera writes: "Buddhism has no objection to the use of the words *atta*, or *satta*, or *puggala* to indicate the individual as a whole, or to distinguish one person from another, where such distinction is necessary, especially as regards such things as memory and *kamma* which are private and personal and where it is necessary to recognize the existence of separate lines of continuity (*santāna*). But, even so, these terms should be treated only as labels, binding-conceptions and conventions in language, assisting economy in thought and word and nothing more. Even the Buddha uses them sometimes: 'These are worldly usages, worldly terms of communication, worldly descriptions, by which a Tathāgata communicates without misapprehending them' (D. I, 195f)."[17]

Nyanatiloka adds to this idea when writing about the term *satta*: "This term, just like *atta*, *puggala*, *jīva* and all other terms denoting 'ego-entity,' is to be considered as a merely conventional term (*vohāra-vacana*), not possessing any reality value."[18]

All of the various conceptions of psychology and religion regarding a *self* or *soul* of any kind were in-

deed denied existence in the ultimate sense by the Buddha. But we may use terms such as self and ego to describe a particular arrangement of the five *khandhas* (aggregates) which give the illusory appearance of an individual. As Sister Vajirā, an *Arahant* at the time of the Buddha, said:

> When all constituent parts are there,
> The designation 'cart' is used;
> Just so, where the five groups exist,
> Of 'living being' do we speak.[19]

In conclusion, the Sayadaw U Sīlānanda has given us lectures on the *anattā* doctrine in which he uses terms such as soul and self interchangeably. This is because the doctrine of *anattā* was taught by the Buddha from the point of view of the Fully Enlightened One, a view which saw that all things are *anattā*. It is with this wisdom that the lectures are given.

Understanding Anattā

The *anattā* doctrine is one of the most important teachings of Buddhism. It is the most distinctive feature of Buddhism, for, as many scholars have recognized, it makes Buddhism different from all other religions. Scholars write that all other religions accept the existence of some kind of spiritual, metaphysical, or psychological entity or agent or being inside and, in some cases, simultaneously outside of sentient beings. That is, most religions accept the existence of a soul or self.

Donald Watson writes: "Of the world's major religions, only Buddhism denies or is agnostic about the existence of a soul."[20]

Another scholar, Richard Kennedy, writes: "According to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, each soul will be judged at the end of the world…. It is the soul which will determine whether the individual is punished by hell or rewarded by eternal life in heaven…. Buddhism teaches that there is no such thing as a soul or true, permanent self."[21]

The *Encyclopedia Americana* writes: "In Buddhism there is no perduring or surviving self such as the *ātman*. Meditation leads to the awareness that the idea of self, or *ātman*, is mere illusion."[22]

In *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, the teaching of the existence of the soul is traced through every major religion throughout history: primitive animistic, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hebrew, Greek religion in

Homeric, Orphic, Pythagorean, and Platonic versions; Hindu, Zoroastrian, Chinese, Muslim, Japanese, and Christian. But, as the writers state, "Buddhism, in its classic form, rejected the Hindu concept of *atman* as the essential, immortal self…."[23]

As we can see, Buddhism is the only major religion that denies the existence of a metaphysical entity which is usually called a self or soul.

Buddhism is divided into two major schools, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, which have, in some cases, major differences. But both schools adhere to the *anattā* doctrine. H. von Glasenapp writes: "The negation of an imperishable *Ātman* is the common characteristic of all dogmatic systems of the Lesser as well as the Great Vehicle [meaning here Theravāda and Mahāyāna, respectively], and, there is, therefore, no reason to assume that Buddhist tradition which is in complete agreement on this point has deviated from the Buddha's original teaching."[24]

Although the *anattā* doctrine is so important, so distinctive, and supposedly so universally accepted by Buddhists, it is still the most misunderstood, the most misinterpreted, and the most distorted of all the teachings of the Buddha. Some scholars who have written on Buddhism had a great respect for the Buddha, liked His teachings, revered Him and honored Him, but they could not imagine that such a profound thinker had actually denied the existence of a soul.

Consequently, they have tried to find apparent loopholes in the teachings through which they have tried to insert the affirmation of *attā* by the Buddha. For exam-

ple, two modern scholars, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and I. B. Horner, in their book, *The Living Thoughts of Gotama the Buddha*, have devoted much of the book to the idea that Buddha taught a doctrine of two selves, the great Self, spelled with an upper case 'S' to signify the spiritual self or soul, and a small self, the personal ego, spelled with a lower case 's'. They claim that Buddha denied only this personal self or ego when He spoke of *anattā*. These scholars base their ideas on mistranslations of Pāḷi terms, and later in these lectures I will devote considerable time to analyzing the Pāḷi passages which they have mistranslated.

Another scholar, John Blofeld, also claims that Buddha was really teaching a doctrine of two selves, one true Self or Soul, and one false personal self or ego. Notice in the following quote how he must clarify that the Zen doctrine of Self or One Mind is not in reality the *Ātman* of the Hindu Brahmins:

> The doctrine of *Ātman* has always been the centre of Buddhist controversy. There is no doubt that Gautama Buddha made it one of the central points of his teaching, but the interpretations of it are various. The Theravādins interpret it not only as "no self," but also as "no Self," thereby denying man both an ego and all participation in something of the nature of Universal Spirit or the One Mind. The Mahāyānists accept the interpretation of "egolessness," holding that the real "Self" is none other than that indescribable "non-entity," the One Mind; something

far less of an "entity" than the *Ātman* of the Brahmins.[25]

The "Universal Spirit," "One Mind," and "Self" which Blofeld finds within the *anattā* doctrine are really an *Ātman*, an *atta*, of a finer substance, "less of an entity," as he says, but nevertheless an *Ātman*. These ideas of *atta* are therefore in conflict with the *anattā* doctrine of the Buddha. As mentioned before, most Mahāyānists accept the doctrine of *anattā*, but later schools of Mahāyāna, such as the Chinese Zen of which Blofeld writes, may have drifted into a soul-like theory.

The controversy over the *anattā* doctrine seems to be based on a deep fear of the denial of the existence of a soul. People are often very attached to their lives, so they like to believe that there exists something everlasting, eternal, and permanent inside them. When someone comes along and tells them that there is nothing permanent in them, nothing by which they will continue eternally, such as a soul, they may become frightened. They wonder what will become of them in the future – they have the fear of extinction. Buddha understood this, as we can see in the story of Vacchagotta, who, like many other people, was frightened and confused by the *anattā* doctrine.[26]

Vacchagotta was an ascetic who once went to the Buddha to discuss some important matters. He asked the Buddha, "Is there *atta*?" Buddha remained silent. Vacchagotta then asked, "Is there no *atta*?" But Buddha again remained silent. After Vacchagotta went

away, Buddha explained to Ananda why he had remained silent. Buddha explained that He knew that Vacchagotta was very confused in his thinking about *atta*, and that if He were to respond that there does exist *atta*, then He would be expounding the eternalist view, the eternal soul theory, with which He did not agree. But if He were to say that *atta* did not exist, then Vacchagotta might think that He was expounding the annihilationist view, the view that a person is nothing but a psychophysical organism which will be completely annihilated at death.

Since this latter view denies *kamma*, rebirth, and dependent origination, Buddha did not agree with this. Buddha teaches, in fact, that people are reborn with *paṭisandhi*, "relinking consciousness," a rebirth consciousness which does not transmigrate from the previous existence, but which comes into existence by means of conditions included in the previous existences, conditions such as *kamma*. Thus a reborn person is not the same as the one who has died, nor is the reborn person entirely different from the one who has died. Most importantly, no metaphysical entity, no soul, and no kind of spiritual self continues from one existence to another in Buddha's teaching.

But this teaching was too difficult for Vacchagotta, and Buddha wanted to wait for a time when Vacchagotta would mature in intellect. Buddha was not a computer who gave automatic answers to every question. He taught according to the circumstances and temperaments of the people, for their benefit. As it happened, Vacchagotta advanced spiritually through

Vipassanā meditation, which allowed him to realize the suffering, impermanent, and no-soul nature of all things, and he later became an *Arahant*. Unfortunately, this story is used by some scholars to try to prove that Buddha did not really deny the existence of *atta*.[27]

Let us now examine the ideas contained in the term *atta*, Before Buddha appeared in this world, Brāhmaṇism, which was later to be called Hinduism, prevailed in India. Brāhmaṇism teaches the doctrine of the existence of *atta* (in Sanskrit, *ātman*), which is usually translated as *soul* or *self*. When Buddha appeared, He claimed that there is no *ātman*. This doctrine was so important that Buddha proclaimed it only five days after His first sermon, the sermon on the Four Noble Truths. The five disciples who heard that first sermon became "streamwinners" (*Sotāpannas*) – persons who have attained the first stage of enlightenment. Five days later, Buddha assembled the five disciples and taught them the *anattā* doctrine. By the end of that *Sutta*, all five became *Arahants*, persons who have attained the highest stage of enlightenment.

What is this *atta* which the Buddha negated? The word *anattā* is a combination of two words: *an* (< *na*) and *atta*. *An* means *not* or *no*, and *atta* is usually translated as *soul* or *self* (sometimes with upper case 'S' to signify a spiritual entity). But *atta* has a wide range of meanings, which we will now examine. These terms are discussed in two famous books of Hindu scripture, the Upanishads[28] and the Bhagavad Gita[29]. Many views of *atta* are found in the Buddhist *Brahmajāla Sutta*[30], which I will discuss later.

Atta is the inner core of anything. The inner core of a tree is the hardest part and thus the core of something can imply permanency. The core may also imply the best part of something, the part which is the essence, the part which is pure, real, beautiful, and enduring. The idea of *atta* as the core of things is found in the *Chandogya* and *Brihadaranyaka Upanishads*.[31]

Another implication of *atta* is that of authority. Authority is the ability to make others follow orders. If anything is to be called *atta*, it must have the power to exercise authority over the nature of things, as stated in the *Kena Upanishad*.[32] In addition, *atta* is not subject to any other authority: it is the highest authority (*sayaṃvasī*) – one who is his own master. It is like a lord or owner (*sāmī*). *Atta* is the lord of ourselves.[33] It is distinct from ourselves and abides in ourselves. It is the dweller (*nivāsī*) which is not part of the five aggregates. *Atta* is also the agent of action, a doer (*kāraka*) and it is *atta* which actually does everything, good or bad. *Atta* is that by which we act, that by which we enjoy or suffer. In ignorance we identify ourselves with the body and ego, forgetting that we are really ***atta***. When we do something, it is really at the command of *atta*, but we ignorantly believe that we as individuals actually control our lives. *Atta* is thus a director and an experiencer.[34]

Another meaning of *atta* is that of soul, a spiritual entity inside of all people. The soul, called *ātman* in Hindu scriptures, is the individual self, and it is identical with the Universal Self, the Supreme Being, called *Brahman*. *Ātman* resides in everyone and in every liv-

ing being. Like *Brahman*, *ātman* is eternal. When the body dies, *ātman* moves to another body and makes that body its new home. In this way, it moves from one body to another, discarding the worn-out body and taking a new one. Liberation is, according to Hinduism, the realization that *ātman* is identical with the Universal *Ātman* or *Brahman*, or that the individual *ātman* is part of *Brahman*[35].

Ātman is eternal – no one can kill or wound *ātman*. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishṇa, one incarnation of the god Vishṇu, has this in mind when he instructs the great warrior, Arjuna, to go into battle. Arjuna was at first reluctant to go into battle in order to fight against his own cousins, but Krishṇa tells him that no weapon can cut *ātman*, no fire can burn *ātman*. Even if you kill someone, you kill only the body:

> "If any man thinks he slays, and if another thinks he is slain, neither knows the way of truth, The Eternal in man cannot kill; the Eternal in man cannot die. He is never born, and he never dies. He is in Eternity: he is forever more."[36]

Krishṇa then urges Arjuna to do his honorable duty as a member of the warrior caste and go into battle, which Arjuna does.

Buddha denied the *ātman* theory. According to Buddha, there is nothing we can call an inner core which is eternal and blissful. There is also nothing we can call upon to exercise authority over the nature of things. In Buddhism, there is no doer apart from doing, and no experiencer apart from the experiencing. There

is nothing or no one which is omnipotent because everything is at the mercy of the constant creation and dissolution of conditioned things.

Buddha taught that there are only five aggregates (*khandhas*): (1) corporeality (material process, or form); (2) feelings; (3) perceptions; (4) mental formations; and (5) consciousness. Less specifically, we may say that there are only two groups of phenomena in this existence: mind and matter, *nāma* and *rūpa*. Apart from mind and matter, there exists nothing whatsoever that we can call *atta*. The only thing that exists outside of the realm of *nāma* and *rūpa* is the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) *Nibbāna*, Absolute Truth, but, as I will discuss later in these lectures, even *Nibbāna* is *anattā*.

Buddha taught that, for us, there are only the five aggregates. We are a compound of five aggregates, and after we analyze and observe them one by one with the deep insight of meditation, we will realize that there remains nothing: no soul, no self, apart from the aggregates. The combination of the five aggregates is what we call a person, a being, a man, or a woman. There is nothing apart from the five aggregates – corporeality, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness – which are interacting and dependent upon each other. No director, no doer, no experiencer, and no essence can be found. *Atta* is merely an idea which has no corresponding reality whatsoever.

In the *suttas*[37], we find a story of a very famous ascetic-scholar named Saccaka. One day he heard that Buddha taught the *anattā* doctrine. Since he was a very sharp debater, he decided that he would go to

the Buddha and convince Him that the *anattā* doctrine was wrong. He was very confident; he claimed that if he were to debate with a stone pillar, that pillar would sweat from fear. He claimed that, just as a strong man takes a goat and flings it around his shoulders, so he would take hold of Gotama and fling Him around in debate.

Saccaka and his followers went to the Buddha, and there exchanged greetings. He asked Buddha to explain the doctrines He taught. Buddha replied that He taught *anattā*. Saccaka countered, "No. There is *atta*. The five aggregates are *atta*." Buddha replied, "Do you really think that *rūpa* (corporeality) is *atta*?" As it happened, Saccaka was very ugly, and if he said that corporeality was *atta*, then Buddha could counter, "Then why don't you make yourself more handsome?" Thus Saccaka was forced to say that *rūpa* is not *atta*. Here we can see Buddha striking down several characteristics that are attributed to *atta*. If Saccaka had an *atta*, he could call upon it to exercise authority and power in order to change his appearance. After all, *atta* is identical to *Brahman*, the supreme ruler, the infinite, omnipotent creator and source of all things, as explained in the *Bhagavad Gita*.[38]

But, according to Buddha, there exist only the five aggregates, the five *khandhas*, and these are not *atta* because they are subject to the laws of impermanence, suffering, and no-soul. *Rūpa* (material form) is not *atta*; it is not master and ruler of itself, and it is subject to affliction. The other *khandhas* – feeling, perception,

mental formations, and consciousness – are also subject to the same laws. Saccaka was therefore defeated.

Although it may be easy to understand that *rūpa* (material form) is not *atta*, some people may find it difficult to understand why the other *khandhas* – feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness – which we may summarize as simply *nāma* (mind) do not constitute an entity which can be called *atta*. After all, many people believe that mind and soul are identical or interrelated, and they define mind and/or soul as that part of a person which gives life and consciousness to the physical body, and they further believe that, as such, it is the spiritual and psychological center of the person.

But, according to the Buddha, *nāma* is not *atta* for the same reasons that *rūpa* is not *atta*: *nāma* is equally subject to the laws of impermanence, suffering, and no-soul, as we shall study further when we analyze the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* in depth. Buddha treats *nāma* and *rūpa* equally, and they are mutually dependent upon each other:

> "Just as a wooden puppet, though unsubstantial, lifeless, and inactive, may by means of pulling strings be made to move about, stand up, and appear full of life and activity; just so are mind and body, as such, something empty, lifeless and inactive; but by means of their mutual working together, this mental and bodily combination may move about, stand up, and appear full of life and activity."[39]

Furthermore, we must remember that *nāma-rūpa* or *khandhas* are merely abstract classifications made by the Buddha, and, as such, they have no real existence as groups. That is, there is never the functioning of an entire entity or group known as corporeality or feeling or perception or mental formations or consciousness, but only the functioning of individual representatives of these groups. For example, with one unit of consciousness, only one single kind of feeling can be associated. Two different units of perception cannot arise at the same moment, and only one kind of consciousness, for example seeing consciousness, can arise at one time. A smaller or larger number of mental formations can arise with every state of consciousness. The groups never arise as a totality; only constituents or bits from a certain group can arise depending on conditions. There are no integrally functioning groups which can be called a self or a mind.

Moreover, the single constituents of these apparent groups are all equally subject to the laws of impermanence, suffering, and no-soul.

Another way to study the question of why *nāma* is not *atta* is simply to go back to the definition of *khandhas* given by the Buddha in *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, XX, 56. Here we will see that the four *khandhas,* which can be classified simply as *nāma* (mind) are in no way to be understood as an abiding mind substance or as anything that can be called *atta*. Rather, the *khandhas* are completely interdependent, and the constituents of each group condition the arising of the others. There is no self-existing, abiding entity in any part of the

following definition, but only constituents which mutually condition each other and arise only when they interact:

> "What, 0 monks, is the corporeality-group? The four primary elements and corporeality depending thereon….
>
> What, 0 monks, is the feeling-group? There are six classes of feeling: due to visual impression, to sound impression, to odour impression, to taste impression, to bodily impression, and to mind impression….
>
> What, 0 monks, is the perception-group? There are six classes of perception: perception of visual objects, of sounds, of odours, of tastes, of bodily impressions, and of mental impressions….
>
> What, 0 monks, is the group of mental formations? There are six classes of volitional states: with regard to visual objects, to sounds, to odours, to tastes, to bodily impressions, and to mind objects….
>
> What, 0 monks, is the consciousness-group? There are six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness."

Based on the above definitions, it is easy to see that nothing which can be called *atta* can be found in the workings of *rūpa* or *nāma*.

Still another way in which the nature of *nāma* and *rūpa* is analyzed is to be found in the *Abhidhamma*, which is highly recommended for anyone who wants to understand Buddhism thoroughly. This is the most comprehensive and analytical study of all phenomena given by the Buddha. Here Buddha analyzes *nāma* and *rūpa* into three groups of absolute realities, which are 89 types of consciousness (*cittas*), 52 mental factors (*cetasikas*), and 28 material properties (*rūpa*). Here too, there is no abiding mind substance or *atta*, but only the interdependent workings of the constituents of these groups.

Misunderstanding Anattā

We will now discuss some of the attempts to place a doctrine of *atta* into Buddhism. Some scholars have tried to, in the words of Dr. Walpola Rahula, "smuggle" the idea of *atta* into the teachings of the Buddha.[40]

Let us now see how two scholars, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and I. B. Horner, already discussed briefly, have mistranslated certain Pāḷi terms to demonstrate that Buddha affirmed the existence of *atta*. They argue that Buddha did indeed claim that the five aggregates are not *atta*, but that He never directly denied the existence of *atta*. The five aggregates are not *atta*, but there is something apart from the five aggregates that we can call *atta*, self or soul, these scholars claim.[41] Whenever Coomaraswamy and Horner see the word *atta*, they try to imagine that it means *eternal self* or *soul*.

One of the passages they point to is found in *Dhammapada* (verse 160): *"Attā hi attano nātho."* They translate it as "Self is the lord of self."[42] They say that it means that the big Self is the lord of the little self. Actually, it means, "One is one's own lord or refuge," or, "One is one's own support." The second line of the verse reads, *"Ko hi nātho paro siyā*?" or, "Who else can be the lord or refuge?" In Pāḷi, the word *atta* can mean *self, soul*, or *eternal self*, in the Hindu sense, or it can simply be a part of a reflexive pronoun like *himself, yourself*, or *myself*. Thus when Buddha says *"Attā hi attano nātho,*

ko hi natho paro siyā?" meaning "One is one's own lord or refuge; who else can be the lord or refuge", it is clear that *atta* means *oneself*, not *soul*. Buddha urges people to rely on themselves, on their own effort, and not to rely on others in their spiritual practice.

Another passage which is misinterpreted in the book by Coomaraswamy and Horner is from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*[43]: *"Attadīpā viharatha attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā."* The meaning is, "Dwell having yourself as an island, having yourself as a refuge and not anyone else as a refuge." Here also they interpret *atta* to mean *soul* or *eternal self*.[44a] They claim that Buddha was instructing us to make the soul our island or refuge. But in the next line, Buddha says, *"Dhammadīpā viharatha dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā,"* which means, "Dwell having the *Dhamma* (Buddha's teachings) as an island, having the *Dhamma* as a refuge, nothing else as a refuge." Buddha is instructing his followers to rely on their own effort and on the teachings, especially as He was soon to be gone from this earth. The idea of *atta* as *soul* is completely foreign to this passage. Moreover, Buddha went on to say, "How is the monk to dwell making himself an island?" He then went on to describe the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness. The Buddha really meant that one should make *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation (contemplation of the body, feelings, mind, and dhamma objects) one's refuge. There is no mention of soul whatsoever.

Another passage Coomaraswamy and Horner point to is the story in which Buddha spoke to some princes. There were thirty princes who were cousins

of King Pasenadi of Kosala. Twenty-nine of them had wives, but one did not.

One day, they went to a park to amuse themselves, and they hired a woman for the unwed prince. When they were drunk and having fun, the hired woman took all of the valuables and ran away with them. They looked for her and met the Buddha. They asked Buddha if He had seen her and He said, "What do you think, young men? Which is better for you? To search after the woman or to search after yourselves (*attānaṁ gaveseyyātha*)?" They replied that it would be better to search after themselves, and so Buddha told them to sit down and listen to a *Dhamma* talk.[44b]

Coomaraswamy and Horner interpret the word *atta* in that passage to mean *higher Self* or *soul*,[45] and they want it to mean that Buddha told the princes to search after *atta*. But Buddha is telling the princes to turn away from chasing after worldly pleasures and to practice the self-discipline of the Noble Path. In that *Dhamma* talk, Buddha spoke about giving (*dāna*), moral conduct (*sīla*), the celestial world (*sagga*), the peril, vanity, and depravity of sense pleasures (*kamānaṁ ādīnavaṁ*, etc.), and the advantages of renunciation (*nekkhamme ānisaṁsaṁ*). There is no mention whatsoever of searching for a soul, for *atta*.

Another passage mistranslated by Coomaraswamy and Horner is one found in *Visuddhimagga*: "*buddhattā … Buddho*."[46] They translate it as, "Buddha is awakened Self."[47] But the correct translation of the Pāḷi is, "He is the Buddha because he knows or he has known." The word *buddhattā* is not a compound of *buddha* and *atta*,

but one word, *buddha*, with the suffix *-tta* combined with the ablative case termination, *ā*, which means *'because of'*. The word *buddhattā* therefore means *'because of the state of being one who knows'*.

It would be better to say that one does not believe in the *anattā* doctrine and that Buddha was wrong about it than to try to say that Buddha taught a religion with *atta* in it. It is not accurate to say that Buddha did not deny *atta*. In fact, there are many places in the Pāḷi canon where *atta* is denied by Buddha. For example, Buddha once said, "I do not see a soul theory which, if accepted, does not lead to the arising of grief, lamentation, suffering, distress, and tribulations." Buddha also said, "Since neither self nor anything pertaining to self can truly be found, is not the speculative view that the universe is *atta* wholly and completely foolish?"[48] Buddha teaches that belief in *atta* is a wrong view (*ditthi* or *miccha-ditthi*) which will lead to misery. Wrong views must be rejected because they are a source of wrong and evil aspirations and conduct.

In *Majjhima Nikāya*[49a], Buddha describes the belief in *atta* as an idea which leads to selfishness and pride: "The Perfect One is free from any theory (*diṭṭhigata*), for the Perfect One has seen what corporeality is, and how it arises and passes away. He has seen what feeling… perception… mental formations… consciousness are, and how they arise and pass away. Therefore I say that the Perfect One has won complete deliverance through the extinction, fading away, disappearance, rejection and casting out of all imaginings and conjectures, of all inclinations to the vainglory of 'I' and 'mine'."[49b]

In the famous *Brahmajāla Sutta* which is recommended for those who want to study an explanation of wrong views, Buddha describes and classifies all conceivable wrong views and speculations about reality. One of those wrong views is the belief that there exists an eternal self. Buddha says of this view: "Therein, bhikkhus, when those recluses and brahmins who are eternalists proclaim on four grounds the self and the world to be eternal – that is only the agitation and vacillation of those who do not know and do not see; that is only the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving."[50]

Coomaraswamy and Horner argue that Buddha's denial of *atta* refers only to the phenomenal self, and that His denial is really an affirmation of what they call the Great Self (*mah'atta*).[51] They argue that Buddha stated that the five aggregates are not *atta*, but that He never categorically stated that there is no *atta*, no Self.[52] They claim that Buddha was only directing us not to see the real Self in the personal ego – a view identical to the Hindu view. They reason that Buddha's denial of certain things being *atta* indicates that He affirmed a true *atta* of a different nature. When Buddha said, "This is not *atta*," these scholars insert the following argument: "But a moment's consideration of the logic of the words will show that they assume the reality of a Self that is not any one or all of the 'things' that are denied of it."[53]

But let us say, for the sake of argument, that I have five animal horns here. If I say, "None of these horns is the horn of a rabbit," does it mean that there exists

somewhere else or in another form such a thing as a horn of a rabbit? No. A horn of a rabbit is just a designation, an abstraction, without any corresponding reality. Similarly, Buddha often said, "This is not *atta*. That is not *atta*. Nothing here is *atta*." Does that indicate that Buddha means that there exists somewhere something that can be called *atta*? No.

I will conclude this section by explaining a very important statement found in *Patisambhidāmagga*[54] and in *Majjhima Nikāya*[55]: *"Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā; sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā* (not in *M.N.*); *sabbe dhammā anattā*." The first sentence means, "All conditioned things are impermanent." The second means, "All conditioned things are suffering." The third sentence, however, is different. Here, Buddha does not use the word *saṅkhārā*, but He uses *dhamma* instead. *Dhamma* here means all things without exception. So the third sentence means, "All things, conditioned or unconditioned, are *anattā*, are void of self and soul." This means that even *Nibbāna*, which is *asaṅkhata*, unconditioned, is not *atta* or is void of *atta*. This statement unequivocally denies *atta* of any kind, even in Ultimate Truth and Enlightenment, even in *Nibbāna*.

Impermanence, Suffering and No-Soul

The doctrine of *anattā* is very important to Buddhists. No realization of Truth can occur without the knowledge of the *anattā* (no-soul) nature of things. To realize Truth, one must practice meditation, and during meditation, the knowledge of *anattā* must arise. One needs the knowledge of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*, that is, the knowledge of impermanence, of suffering, and of the no-soul nature of things. Until one experiences these characteristics in meditation, not just intellectually, but directly, one cannot make progress. *Vipassanā* (Insight) meditation deals directly with these characteristics. These characteristics run through all stages of *Vipassanā*. I will discuss *Vipassanā* later, but first we must explain what conceals the three characteristics from perception during meditation.

Impermanence is concealed by continuity. If one looks at a candle flame, one may think that it is the same flame from moment to moment. Actually, the flame is constantly disappearing and arising again every second. We have the illusion of one flame because of the idea and appearance of continuity.

The nature of suffering is concealed by changing into different postures. When we are sitting and feel some pain, we change posture and the pain goes away. Actually, we are changing postures constantly at every moment of our lives, but this is not apparent to us. The moment a tiny unpleasant sensation is felt, we change postures. The characteristic of no-soul is concealed by

the perception that things are compact and solid. We look at things and at ourselves as solid, compact things. Until we can break through the false perception that we are compact, we will not see the no-soul nature of things.

That is why there are meditational practices in which the four elements, earth, water, fire, and air are contemplated. Actually, the primary qualities of those elements are contemplated: earth is characterized by hardness or softness, water by fluidity or cohesion, fire by heat, and air by extending or supporting. If we can have the insight into phenomena as being composed of elements and their characteristics, then the idea of compactness will be weakened. We think that we are substantial, but if we have insight into our real nature, the nature of being composed of *nāma* and *rūpa*, or more precisely, of elements and forces mutually dependent and interacting with each other, then the idea of a coherent, abiding, substantial self is weakened, and nothing we can call a self is found."[56]

The *anattā* doctrine is of primary importance to a Buddhist. In fact, *anattā* can only be understood when there is a Buddha or a Buddha's teaching in the world. No one but a Buddha can penetrate into the *anattā* nature of things because only through *Vipassanā* meditation, discovered by Buddha, can insight into *anattā* be realized. Even though great and profound thinkers are around, they still cannot penetrate into *anattā*, and other kinds of meditation, such as *Samatha* (Tranquility), may give you psychic powers or higher

states of consciousness, but they cannot lead you to the insight into *anattā*.

As I mentioned earlier, the belief in a soul was described by the Buddha as a major cause of suffering. The belief in *atta* of any kind, whether belief in a personal ego or in a spiritual self, is the cause of all *dukkhas* in this round of rebirths; the belief in *atta* is the root of greed, hatred, and delusion. Atheists may not believe in a spiritual soul, but they serve the desires of their personal ego and thus may commit deeds of greed, hatred, and delusion. The idea of *atta* is very hard to conquer, but still we must try because realization of *anattā* is the way to deliverance, while the persistence of the idea of *atta* is a major cause of misery. One cannot overemphasize the importance of *anattā*, as Nyanatiloka explains:

> "Whosoever has not penetrated this impersonality of all existence, and does not comprehend that in reality there exists only this continually self-consuming process of arising and passing bodily and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate ego-entity within or without this process, he will not be able to understand Buddhism, i.e., the teaching of the Four Noble Truths… in the right light. He will think that it is his ego, his personality, that experiences suffering, his personality that performs good and evil actions and will be reborn according to these actions, his personality that will en-

ter *Nibbāna*, his personality that walks on the Eightfold Path."[57]

The words of Nyanatiloka bring up a very important point often asked about *Nibbāna*: In the absence of a soul, who or what is it that enters *Nibbāna*? This is a difficult subject. From what has been said so far in this lecture, we can certainly say that there is no *atta* or self which realizes *Nibbāna*. What realizes *Nibbāna* is insight-wisdom, *Vipassanā-panna*. It is not the property of a personal or universal self, but is rather a power developed through meditative penetration of phenomena.

Yet another even more difficult question is: What happens to a *Tathāgata* (here in the sense of one who has realized *Nibbāna*) after death? Once again, Buddha gave his answer without recourse to any kind of spiritual entity such as *atta*. Buddha essentially replied that no words could possibly describe what happens to a *Tathāgata* after death: "A *Tathāgata* released from what is called body etc., is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean. It does not fit the case to say that he is reborn or not reborn, or reborn and not reborn, or neither reborn nor not reborn." Then He goes on to say, after being questioned further: "Profound is this doctrine, hard to see, hard to comprehend, calm, excellent, beyond the sphere of reasoning, subtle, intelligible only to the wise."[58] Thus *Nibbāna*, the Absolute Noble Truth, the extinction of all continuity and becoming, the "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed".[59] Reality is affirmed without reference to

atta. Likewise, the *Arahant* who realizes *Nibbāna* does so by means of a flash of insight which destroys forever all illusions of the existence of *atta*. I will conclude with some well-written words from Nyanatiloka:

> One cannot too often and too emphatically stress the fact that not only for the actual realization of the goal of *Nibbāna*, but also for a theoretical understanding of it, it is an indispensable preliminary condition to grasp fully the truth of *anattā*, the egolessness and insubstantiality of all forms of existence. Without such an understanding, one will necessarily misconceive *Nibbāna* – according to one's either materialistic or metaphysical leanings – either as annihilation of an ego, or an eternal state of existence into which an ego or self enters or with which it merges. Hence it is said:

> "Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found;
> The deed is, but no doer of the deed is there;
> *Nibbāna* is, but not the man who enters it;
> The path is, but no traveler on it is seen."[60]

Direct Experience of Anattā

The *anattā* doctrine is extremely difficult to comprehend. One can speculate or ponder about it – that is one kind of knowledge, acquired by listening to a lecture or by reading. One may also ponder over it more deeply in contemplation. But one can only really penetrate into it during *Vipassanā* meditation.

When yogis practice, they keep themselves aware of everything. When they see something, there are two things: the mind which sees and the object seen; apart from these, there is nothing. More specifically, seeing is a process which depends on four things: the eye, the visible object, light, and attention to the object. If one of these conditions is lacking, no seeing occurs. If one does not have eyes, no *atta* can make one see. Only when all conditions are met does seeing consciousness arise. No agent like *atta* is a part of this.

Likewise, when yogis note themselves thinking during meditation, they note "thinking, thinking, thinking," and they find only thinking and the mind which notes it – they do not find a self or ego or *atta*. They do not find that "I am thinking," unless they add this idea as an afterthought. They really only find that thinking is occurring. In this process, yogis can see the impermanence of mind and thought: one thought comes, then goes; another thought comes and goes, and this goes on and on. A new thought comes every moment, arising and disappearing. They directly see the impermanence of thought. They can also notice

the impermanence of material things, such as physical pain, by noting the arising and disappearing of the pain in the body. They can see that all things are oppressed by rise and fall, by arising and disappearing. This oppression of phenomena by arising and disappearing is the characteristic of *dukkha* (suffering).

Unwisely, we desire for things to be permanent, yet we realize that we have no power to make impermanent things permanent; we realize that we have no control or authority over things. No inner core, no *atta*, can be found in any observed phenomena. Yogis can discover this *anattā* nature of things in *Vipassanā* meditation, because gradually they bring awareness and concentration to a high degree and then they have penetrative knowledge into the true nature of mind and body.

Analysis of the Discourse on the Characteristic of No-Soul

Let us now study in more detail the *Sutta* which teaches the doctrine of *anattā*, known as the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta*, "The Discourse on the Characteristic of No-Soul." This was the second sermon of the Buddha.

At the end of the first sermon, the Venerable Koṇḍañña became a *Sotāpanna* (a person at the first stage of enlightenment) and then, according to the Commentaries, for example, the Commentary on *Vinaya*, the other four disciples became *Sotāpannas*, one on each of the four following days.

On the first day after the full-moon day in July, the monk Vappa became a *Sotāpanna*; on the second day, Bhaddiya; on the third day, Mahānāma; and on the fourth day, Assaji. After they became *Sotāpannas*, they all asked Buddha for ordination. Buddha ordained each of them by calling to them, "Come monks." On the fifth day after the full-moon day, the Buddha assembled them and preached to them this discourse on no-soul.

This discourse[61] is even shorter than the first sermon on the Four Noble Truths. It was delivered at the Deer Park at Benares. Buddha called the disciples by saying, "Monks," and they replied, "Venerable Sir," and then the Buddha started.

We can divide the *Sutta* into five parts. In the first part, Buddha says that the five aggregates are not *atta*,

not self or soul. In the second section, Buddha asks the monks if the five aggregates are permanent or impermanent, pleasurable or painful, and then He arrives at the conclusion that the nature of the five aggregates is *anattā*. In the third section, Buddha teaches that the five aggregates should not be taken as a soul or self or as belonging to oneself. In the fourth section, Buddha explains briefly the progress of *Vipassanā* meditation. The last section records that all five monks had attained the stage of *Arahant*. By the end of the *Sutta*, all five monks became *Arahants*, which is the highest stage of enlightenment.

Buddha says, "Bhikkhus, form is *anattā*, (form is not soul or self). Were form soul, then this form would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form be not thus.' And since form is not soul, so it leads to affliction, and none can have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form be not thus.'" Here the Pāḷi word *rūpa* is translated as *form*. The word *form* is here used in the sense of *material properties* or just *matter.* The reader may recall that the first of the five aggregates is form or corporeality. But form cannot be *atta* because it is subject to affliction. *Ātta* (self or soul) must have the meaning which we discussed earlier: that of *vasavattana*, something which has the power and autonomy to change the nature of things. No one likes pain and affliction in the body, but it cannot be changed. If form were *atta*, people could abolish pain, disease, and ugliness by merely wishing. But there is no core or director or soul inside or outside of people which has the power to accomplish such actions.

Buddha considered the second aggregate and says: "Feeling is not soul. Were feeling soul, then this feeling would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of feeling: 'Let my feeling be thus; let my feeling be not thus.'" Then Buddha takes the third, fourth, and fifth aggregates: "Perception is not soul…. Mental formations are not soul…. Consciousness is not soul. Were consciousness soul, then this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness be not thus.'" Consciousness cannot be *atta* because it is not under our control. Consciousness is unavoidably subject to afflictions – to sorrow, depression, and frustration. We cannot avoid being conscious of ugly sights, sounds, and sensations in the world, although we would like to arrange coming into contact with pleasant sensual objects only.

Likewise, in meditation, we would like to be conscious only of the meditation object, and we would like to achieve stillness of mind and concentration, but this is not easy, and we cannot will it. If consciousness were *atta*, we could will our consciousness to be still and concentrated, and then we could proceed to the higher states of mind – perhaps it would only take one day to advance to the higher stages of meditation! But in all cases, consciousness arises completely determined by circumstances and conditions, conditions which are not under our control. Therefore, consciousness cannot be *atta*.

In the second section of the *Sutta*, Buddha asks the monks some questions, which they answer. Buddha

says: "Bhikkhus, how do you conceive it: Is form permanent or impermanent?" Since they were already *Sotāpannas*, they had already seen that the five aggregates are impermanent, suffering, and no-soul, so they answered, "Impermanent, Venerable Sir." Now Buddha asks, "Is what is impermanent, painful, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine. This is I. This is my soul?'" They answered, "No, Venerable Sir." Form is impermanent because it disappears. It comes into being and then vanishes. It has a beginning and an end. The monks had already realized by means of *Vipassanā* knowledge that form is impermanent. They had already seen the three marks of impermanence, which are the three phases of existence: arising, continuation, and dissolution.

Another way to state this process is to call it non-existence after having been in existence, in Pāḷi – *hutvā abhāvato*. Buddha then proceeds to explain that whatever is impermanent is also painful. The mark of pain (*dukkha*) is constant oppression by rise and fall, by arising and dissolution. This can be seen during meditation, when yogis take thoughts as objects and look at them closely. They see that the moment a thought is observed as an object, it disappears, and another thought takes its place. As meditators observe very closely with concentration, they see all objects in the mind arising and disappearing constantly, and this is seen as a kind of oppression by arising and disappearing. Phenomena are called oppressed by rise and fall because nothing is ever at peace; everything is menaced by an endless flux. In this sense, whatever is

impermanent is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means more than just painful. *Dukkha* also comes from our desire for permanence. *Dukkha* means difficult to bear mentally and physically, and thus we call the impermanence of all phenomena *dukkha* (suffering).

In the third part of Buddha's questioning, He asks, "Is that which is impermanent and painful fit to be called 'mine, I, my self or soul?'" Buddha is here leading the monks to the discovery of *anattā*. Is something that is disappearing fit to be called *atta*? No. From *anicca* (impermanence) to *dukkha* (suffering), and finally to *anattā* (no-soul) the monks are led.

Let us review again the processes which hide impermanence, suffering, and no-soul. We, as unenlightened people, fail to see impermanence because we do not see the arising and disappearing of things. We are tricked by continuity, which hides the nature of impermanence. We look at things or at consciousness and see them as continuous. In order to see impermanence, we must observe closely the arising and disappearing of phenomena. We must penetrate, by means of concentration and insight developed in meditation, through the impression of continuity, which acts as a cover of impermanence. Let us think of a ring of fire. Someone has a torch and twirls it to create an impression of a circle of fire. But we know that there is really no ring of fire; it is just the impressions of individual positions of the fire at different places and at different times. But our mind takes the impressions as something continuous; rather, our mind connects the impressions and we deceive ourselves.

If we could take a moving picture of the process and watch it at a slow speed, we would see the individual parts of the sequence of the apparent ring of fire. We would only see light at different places and not a circle. If we cannot pinpoint the components of things in order to see them arising and disappearing, we will continue to see things as whole entities. Let us note here that impermanence in this context means momentary impermanence. If we drop a cup which breaks, we say that it is impermanent. Or if a person dies, we say that the person is impermanent. These examples of impermanence are easy to see.

But when we use that term in the context of *Vipassanā* meditation, we mean the constant arising and disappearing of phenomena, and this can only be observed during *Vipassanā* meditation. Similarly, by *dukkha*, we do not mean ordinary pain or illness. We mean the constant oppression by arising and disappearing, and this can also be seen only in *Vipassanā* meditation, even in phenomena we call pleasurable.

Please recall that *dukkha* is concealed by postures; more specifically, there is always *dukkha* in the body, but we conceal that pain by changing postures. That is why we instruct meditators to sit very still while they are meditating. If yogis avoid changing postures often, they will achieve mindfulness and concentration, and they will observe the nature of *dukkha* directly.

Anattā, the no-soul nature of all things, is concealed by compactness. We usually see things as solid and compact. We have to train our minds through *Vipassanā* meditation to look at and analyze that compactness

more closely. Just as a scientist uses a microscope to look at things in a laboratory, so yogis must use concentration in *Vipassanā* meditation to penetrate into the unsubstantial, *anattā* nature of things. We must try to see through the apparently solid mass of mental and physical phenomena.

Regarding material things, we try to analyze and observe them as earth, water, fire, air, and other material properties. Regarding mental phenomena, we try to see that, for example, one phenomenon is contact, another feeling, and another perception, although these may have been experienced very rapidly as only one mental event. Both mental and physical phenomena are composed of only elements and forces, and thus have the nature of being *anattā* (unsubstantial). That is why we must try to observe everything very slowly in meditation in order to see that phenomena are not held together with a core, an *atta*.

For example, all mental states and material properties have their own functions. Contact has one function, feeling another, and perception still another. If we see these mental phenomena as one connected whole, we fail to see them as parts with specific functions, and we fail to see them as void of a central core, *atta*. These mental states actually have different ways of taking objects and responding to them. *Lobha* (attachment) has one kind of response; *dosa* (hatred) another. We must see the individual differences of these mental states. We need to analyze and observe deeply to see that mind and matter have individual functions and responses. On superficial observation and analy-

sis, everything seems to be compact, whole, and substantial. All of us think that a book is very solid, but if we could look at this book under a microscope, it would appear full of holes, with empty spaces, like a sieve. *Vipassanā* is like using a microscope to see that all things are only elements and forces which are not unified by any kind of core, by any kind of *atta*.

In the third section of the *Sutta*, Buddha states that: 'Any kind of form, whether past, future, or presently arisen; whether in oneself or external; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must with right understanding be regarded thus: 'This is not mine; this is not I; this is not my self or soul.'" There can be different kinds of form, different kinds of matter, but none of them can be regarded as *atta* or as having *atta*. The same is true for feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

Next, Buddha explains to the monks the progress made by a meditator: "When a noble follower who has heard the truth sees thus, he finds estrangement in form, finds estrangement in feeling, finds estrangement in perceptions… in mental formations… in consciousness." This means that the meditator becomes weary of form, dispassionate about matter. The meditator realizes that the aggregates are impermanent, suffering, and no-soul.

"When he finds estrangement, passion fades out." Buddha is here describing stages of *Vipassanā* meditation in a very brief form with many stages left out. The disciple wants to be free from the five aggregates, so this person makes more effort. The meditator then

arrives at equanimity about formations. When Buddha uses the phrase "finds estrangement," He is referring to all of the stages of *Vipassanā* up to the very highest stage. After finding estrangement, passion fades out in one moment, the moment of enlightenment. That is the moment known as *Path consciousness*, when some defilements of the mind are eradicated.

Buddha continues, "With the fading of passion, he is liberated." This means that the meditator has reached the two or three moments after Path consciousness known as *Fruition consciousness*.

"When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated." Here the meditator reflects on the Path, on Fruition, on *Nibbāna*, on defilements destroyed, and on defilements that are remaining.

"He understands: 'Birth is exhausted. The holy life has been lived out. What need to be done is done. Of this there is no more beyond.'" Like Buddha when He became enlightened, the meditator says similar words.

The discourse ends: "This is what the Blessed One said. The Bhikkhus were glad, and they approved His words. Now during this utterance, the hearts of the Bhikkhus of the group of five were liberated from taints, through clinging no more." This means that they had become *Arahants*. By understanding the doctrine of *anattā*, they were now free of all fetters, defilements, and impurities. They had reached the highest state of enlightenment. They had realized *Nibbāna* and were free from all rebirth.

Questions and Answers

Q: *When you feel pain, you think that it is more permanent than thought. It is not permanent, but it does seem to be continuous.*

A: Yes, it seems to be continuous and to last for a long time, but actually the pain arises and disappears at every moment. Because we cannot see it arising every moment, we think that it is one solid thing. But when you practice meditation and keep noticing the pain, you will get concentration, and then you will come to see that there are gaps in that pain. The same applies to sound, for example. If you note sound in your mind as it occurs, you will get concentration, and you will come to experience gaps in that sound: there is not really one continuous sound.

A person once told me about this level of concentration, which he achieved while he was meditating. Music was playing very loudly the whole night, so he could do nothing except concentrate on the sound by noting "hearing, hearing, hearing." He then achieved concentration and experienced the music in small bits; in other words, he was able to detect gaps in what seemed to be one continuous sound. The elements of the music actually arise and disappear every moment; nothing is ever the same for even two tiny milliseconds.

Q: *When I look at my own mental pain, I see a whole pattern of pain which I interpret according to psychology, which I have studied. I think I have a pretty good knowledge of what it is, but is that an obstacle to seeing the nature of pain?*

A: All that is needed to see the nature of pain is to dwell with awareness on it, to make mental notes of it, and when you get enough concentration, you will penetrate into the nature of pain and see that it is impermanent.

Q: *Even if I were to lose a lot of weight, cut my hair, and develop all new interests, others and myself would still know me as myself. Why is that, if there is no continuity?*

A: That continuity is created only in our minds. Actually, there is no continuity, but there is the relationship of cause and effect. Many people ask: 'If there is no *ātman* to go to different worlds, how do Buddhists say that we have past and future lives?' The answer is that mental and physical phenomena arise and disappear at every moment. They arise, and then disappear, and in their place, other new phenomena arise. But the new phenomena that arise are not totally different or new because they have arisen due to some cause. *Kamma* causes the next life, and that next life is not totally new and different; neither is it the same or identical. The cause causes the effect to arise, and that effect is not the result of just any cause, but of a specific cause: a strong relationship exists between the cause and the effect. The cause can impart some

of its similar qualities to the effect, impart in the sense of causing certain qualities to arise. In this way, we have the notion of continuity, but actually everything is newly arisen at every moment.

There is a Buddhist formula describing rebirth: *neither that person nor another.* This means a person is reborn in a future life, but that person is not the identical person who died here; neither is that person reborn as a totally new person.

The commentaries, such as *Visuddhimagga*, XVII, give some similies as examples. Suppose someone shouts into a cave. When the sound comes back, it is not the original sound, but without the original sound, there can be no echo. Or, suppose one lights a candle from another candle. It cannot be said that the flame has transferred itself to another candle. The flame in the second candle is not the same as that in the first one, but it came into being with the help of the first candle. Similarly, a seal leaves an impression on paper. The impression is not the same as the original seal, but neither is it unrelated to it.

We Buddhists do not accept permanence, but we accept a connection as cause and effect. Cause and effect go on and on, even in this lifetime, from moment to moment. This gives a person the impression of continuity, the impression of being the same person continually. Cause and effect go on and on throughout the lifespan until old age and death. But death is just a conventional term for the

disappearance of a certain psychophysical life process. But actually, we are dying and being reborn at every moment. Thoughts likewise die and come into being at every moment, as do physical properties. Thus, even when we are living as we do now, we are dying, but we do not call it dying. We call it dying only when we come to the end of one life. Immediately after the end of this life, there is the next life. Immediately after death, there is rebirth; there is no interim between death and rebirth.

Think of the midnight hour of the previous day. Only one second after that, we call it a new day, the next day. Actually time is just going on and on. One moment we call Sunday, and the next moment we call Monday. Similarly, life and death and rebirth go on continually.

Q: *How does rebirth cease?*

A: It ceases only when a person cuts off the root of this process. The roots are *lobha* (attachment), *dosa* (anger) and *moha* (ignorance). The *Arahants* have cut off this process altogether, so for them, no future rebirth occurs. They have no desire for the life-death process to continue.

It is like a lamp: when the oil is used up, the flame just disappears. Desire is like the oil; when desire is cut off, there is no new becoming.

Q: *But why does not an Arahant disappear at the moment of enlightenment?*

A: That is because the present life, by which I mean the present body and mind, is the result of past *kamma*. Past *kamma* gives rise to this present life, and it must run its course. The *Arahant* does not acquire new *kamma*, but past *kamma* must have its effect.

Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta

Thus have I heard: The Exalted One was at one time residing at Benares in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There the Exalted One addressed the group of five monks saying: "Monks," and they replied to Him, "Venerable Sir."

Then the Exalted One said:

"Form (*rūpa* or matter) is not soul (*anattā*). If form, monks, were soul, then this form would not lead to affliction, and one would be able to say, 'Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus.' But since form is not soul, so it leads to affliction, and no one can say, 'Let my form be thus. Let my form be not thus.'"

"Feeling (*vedanā*) is not soul. If feeling, monks, were soul, then this feeling would not lead to affliction, and one would be able to say, 'Let my feeling be thus. Let my feeling not be thus.' But since feeling is not soul, so it leads to affliction, and no one can say, 'Let my feeling be thus. Let my feeling not be thus.'"

"Perception (*saññā*) is not soul. If perception, monks, were soul, then this perception would not lead to affliction, and one would be able to say, 'Let my perception be thus. Let my perception not be thus.' But since perception is not soul, so it leads to affliction, and no one can say, 'Let my perception be thus. Let my perception not be thus.'"

"Mental formations (*saṅkhāras*) are not soul. If mental formations, monks, were soul, then these mental formations would not lead to affliction, and one would be able to say, 'Let my mental formations be thus. Let my mental formations not be thus.' But since mental formations are not soul, so they lead to affliction, and no one can say, 'Let my mental formations be thus. Let my mental formations not be thus.'"

"Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is not soul. If consciousness, monks, were soul, then this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one would be able to say, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.' But since consciousness is not soul, so it leads to affliction, and no one can say, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.'"

"Monks, what do you think? Is form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) or satisfactory (*sukha*)?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory – is it fit to be perceived thus: 'This is mine; this is I; this is my soul'?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Monks, what do you think? Is feeling permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory or satisfactory?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory – is it fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine. This is I. This is my soul'?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Monks, what do you think? Is perception permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory or satisfactory?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory – is it fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine. This is I. This is my soul'?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Monks, what do you think? Are mental formations permanent or impermanent."

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory or satisfactory?"

"Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir."

“Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory – is it fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine. This is I. This is my soul’?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“Monks, what do you think? Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Venerable Sir.”

“Now what is impermanent, is it unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, Venerable Sir.”

“Now what is impermanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is transitory – is it fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine. This is I. This is my soul’?”

“No, Venerable Sir.”

“So, monks, whatever perception, whether past, future, or present; whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must with right understanding of things as they really are, be regarded thus: ‘This is not mine. This is not I. This is not my soul.’”

“So, monks, whatever mental formations, whether past, future, or present; whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must, with right understanding of things as they really are, be regarded thus: ‘This is not mine. This is not I. This is not my soul.’”

“So, monks, whatever consciousness, whether past, future, or present; whether gross or subtle; whether in oneself or in others; whether inferior or superior; whether far or near; must, with right understanding of things as they really are, be regarded thus: ‘This is not mine. This is not I. This is not my soul.’”

“Seeing thus, monks, the learned disciple of the Noble Ones becomes weary of form, weary also of feelings, weary also of perception, weary also of mental formations, and weary also of consciousness. Being weary, he becomes detached; being detached, he becomes free; being free, the knowledge arises, ‘I am free.’”

“And he knows, ‘Rebirth is no more; I have finished practicing the life of purity; done is what should be done; of this there is no more beyond.’”

This is what the Exalted One said. Delighted, the group of five monks rejoiced at the Exalted One’s words.

And while this discourse was being given, the minds of the group of five monks were liberated from defilements through clinging no more.

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